Contextual Explorations Through the City: Short Stories from the Architectural Design Studio

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ABSTRACT Through various taught design projects the author has explored a variety of linked contextual analysis techniques within the architectural design studio and has used this paper to catalogue and record these teaching processes. This paper documents the contextual analysis techniques deployed by presenting these in a structure of decreasing scale: firstly, analysis of a city – San Jose - before moving on to discuss analysis within a city district – the Merchant City area in Glasgow - and finally concluding by presenting a project focused on one specific location – a humble street corner, again in Glasgow. When important to do so, the paper will cross reference the experiences of various year groups and demographics within the same contextual analysis technique, highlighting patterns and trends in aptitude for analytical responses to context which remain consistent despite the author visiting these processes with students across different year groups.

KEYWORDS tools, analysis, architectural studio, city

Unless deliberately prescribed otherwise, every project within the architectural design studio will require a degree of contextual analysis, most likely during the initial stages of the design process. Often, this analysis will form the essence of the project, whether that develops through an initial reaction to the width of a street; the height of a building; the depth of the block. Sometimes the historical, cultural or social contexts are as important as the physical context allowing the designer to experience 'site' and 'location' as 'place'.

Within the architectural design studio, the depth of contextual analysis can vary greatly depending on the stage of the student and the nature of the project. The analysis carried out by a Year 1 student may be concerned primarily with the key dimensions of the immediate adjacencies to a site, focussing on the perceived rules apparent within the built

fabric as the catalysts for a contextual response.

By Year 3, the student may have developed a keener sense of contextual exploration, understanding that a designed response can be in reaction to a series of layers of analysis which deal with more than the physical fabric of the site and.

Logically, architectural pedagogy should exploit the architectural studio as the laboratory within which to nurture the skillset within the architectural student. Design projects can, through process and output, challenge the student to demonstrate an ability to be contextually analytical. But is there a logical process within the studio that develops these skills within the architectural student that allows the student to understand the building blocks which may develop from one project to the next? Is there, for that matter, such a clear and distinctive procession through design briefs set or are students merely encouraged to deliver the same contextual approach regardless of their level or the complexity of the project set? In other words, is contextual analysis within the architectural studio a means to an end rather than a key tool in itself?

The City

The Red Ghosts: Encouraging Local Responsiveness through Hidden Narratives & Social Engagement

The Architecture, Design and Urbanism (ADU) 2020 Urban Brandscapes Workshop in San Jose, Costa Rica (September 2013) sought to investigate several key issues faced by the city of San Jose. Firstly, how San Jose brands itself: how is the city viewed from the outside looking in and how does this differ from the perception of the city by its citizens? Secondly, was the problem of retaining visitors within the city who currently use San Jose as an arrival point from which to explore Costa Rica in the wider context.

The workshop provided the author with an opportunity to develop a series of pedagogical tools which could assist students in understanding the importance of local responsiveness in design. Attracting international students and academics, the Urban Brandscapes Workshop was delivered across eight Units of a dozen students. The

author was assigned to Unit 5 made up of local students and students from Seville in Spain and from Panama City (on exchange at Universidad Veritas).

The starting point for the work of Unit 5 was a critical dissection of the main topics identified in the brief. This took the form of a group discussion and debate, chaired by the author (*the tourist*) with the students (*the citizens*) encouraged to be active throughout.

This simple session allowed the Unit to take ownership of the brief by questioning the themes raised through an exploration of individual and collective responses to the city of San Jose, ultimately developing two main areas of focus:

1. Global Projection v Local Perception
2. San Jose as a Tourist Launch Pad

Having established these reactions, Unit 5 were encouraged to develop context based outputs to determine current perceptions of the city from local and visitor viewpoints. Key locations within the city were targeted and 'on street' interviews conducted at observed hotspots allowing the Unit to identify areas on which to concentrate when responding to the

Figure 1: studio based discussions on the themes of the workshop. (Author)

two areas noted above. Interviews were documented through audio recordings and an archive of thoughts was compiled with material logged by location. Conversations often defaulted to themes of historical significance, lost culture and various social problems within the urban city.

These studies allowed an assessment of the design and analysis tools required to establish an architectural response. These tools can be divided into three basic criteria:

• Archiving and Mapping
• Recording
• Provoking

From these observations, Unit 5 identified that significant issues faced by the citizens of, and visitors to, San Jose was navigation and travel owing to the rather unusual 'codes' of way finding deployed in San Jose – relying less on postal addresses and more on approximate distances from, and between, key city landmarks. For example, directions to one's dwelling would include (a) the physical landmark and (b) the distance and orientation from said landmark. "My house is 500m east of Banco Negro".

This codification becomes more complicated, and harder for the tourist to understand, with the inclusion of landmarks which no longer exist physically, remaining only as ghosts within conversations about the heritage of the city. Banco Negro, meaning "The Black Bank" - so called due to its original, dark, granite cladding, is now rebranded in red, white and blue aluminium composite panels as the National Bank. The great tree – "El Higueron" which once stood in San Pedro de Montes de Oca was struck by lightning in the 1998 and no longer exists, but it is key in the navigation code and remains an important meeting point within the city.

Elsewhere in the city, a former prison now houses the Museum of Lost Children but is still referenced as "el prision". The old airport is a gallery, less about departure and arrival and more about contemporary Costa Rican art. As Unit 5 explored San Jose as tourists and citizens, they became increasingly aware of the instances of these ghosts, and more and more convinced that a series of urban markers located on sites and former sites of the San Jose Ghosts would facilitate a better understanding of the city, and a clearer method of navigation through the city.

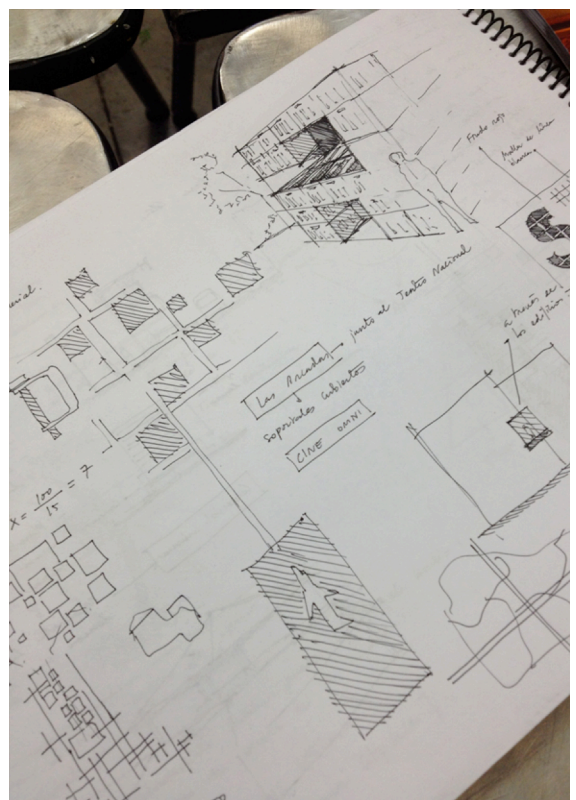Figure 2: Banco Negro – The Black Bank (Author)

Figure 3: Network of Ghosts across San Jose. (Author)

Using the information gathered during the street interviews, and overlaying this with the network of 'ghosts' produced through heritage research, Unit 5 proposed an entirely new method of navigating the city which saw spaces to 'stop and wait' as being of equal importance as the transient spaces which help the citizens and tourists get from one location to another.

Many of these locations would be realised as physical interpretations of the ghosts contained within the coded navigation narratives of the city with the intention of marking literal, physical connections between the old lost city and the new found city.

The overreaching theme for Unit 5 these was a focus on rebranding San Jose as an accessible and stimulating city of great social and cultural diversity. The intended output from the workshop was, therefore, to present these themes to both visitors and citizens alike, through varying mediums and platforms.

To highlight this network, Unit 5 proposed a cohesive brand across all outputs and developed 'The Red Ghosts' as a result, inspired as much by the colour of the Imperial

Beer crates used as building modules for these physical interpretations as by existing red elements of the city such as historic roofing materials and the national soccer team.

As well as the 'Red Ghosts' series across the city, Unit 5 produced a City Guide for San Jose, inspired by the Phaidon Wallpaper series of city guides which, notably, does not include San Jose on its current list of cities.

A prominent feature of the city guide are the various identified locations across the city which form the network of ghosts, an indication that the students of Unit 5 had already taken ownership of the ghosts as they explore new ways to analyse their urban landscape.

This workshop established a set of basic tools for the author which can be catogarised under social, historical and physical contexts. It was evident that the students participating in the workshop initially responded best to the physical context and were quite animated in their descriptions of their city. But, as the workshop progressed, and through the citizen
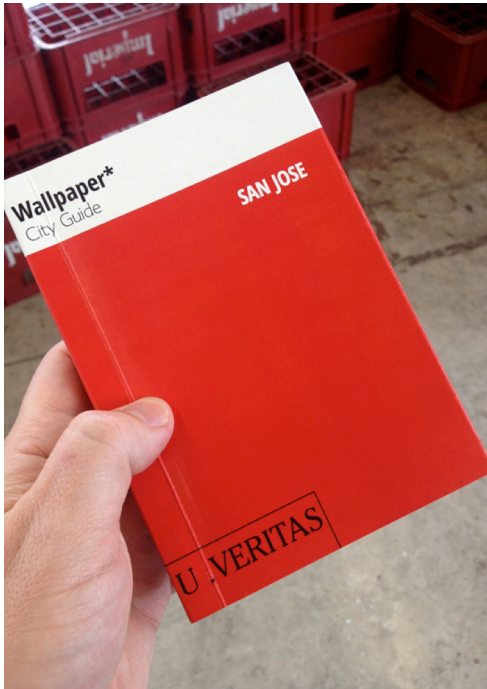

Figure 5: Network of Ghosts across San Jose. (Unit 5)

Figure 6: Network of Ghosts across San Jose. (Unit 5)

Figure 4: Testing design ideas for the network of Ghosts across San Jose. (Author)

Figures 7 & 8: San Jose city guide, inspired by the "Wallpaper City Guides." (Author)

interviews, the social and historical contexts of San Jose became more obvious in their design process. This resulted in a design output which strategically addressed the problems identified in the project brief without proposing a finite, focussed architectural output.

The author was asked to participate in a debriefing session at the conclusion of the workshop, with the organising committee eager to analyse different approaches and teaching styles. This session highlighted that the majority of the workshop facilitators had challenged their units to propose an architectural output which responded to the physical context with little regard to other aspects of contextual analysis. During this session, the author reflected on the ability to draw from an established contextual analysis approach deployed through teaching within the architectural studio back in Glasgow but also on the opportunity to take many more positive elements back from San Jose.

The District

Glasgow as Five Cities:
Thematic Explorations of the City as a Tool
for (Site) Analysis and Recording

In his book *Invisible Cities* Italo Calvino presents a scenario of two fictitious characters – a traveller, Marco Polo and Emperor Kublai Khan discussing various locations and cities

throughout the world.[1] The reader is allowed to eaves drop on these 'conversations' as Polo, at the behest of Khan, reports on his many travels, describing what he has seen and where he has been. He does this through a series of wonderfully elaborate stories about the various cities he has found, describing the materials, the details, the shapes, sounds and smells and the people of each city, all of which, it would seem, are very different, unique and individual.

Discussions between the two are delivered through the presentation and interpretation of various artefacts and objects brought from each city. As the book develops however, the reader is let in on Polo's secret. His stories and descriptions are actually in reference to just one city – Venice. Each visit, each story, each explanation reveals a new layer or facet of the same place. Each 'city' explores Venice through a different theme. Calvino is playful in the manner in which he introduces the notion of analysis of an urban environment through exploration and thereafter, through the creation of a taxonomy of that environment.

This paper describes how this method of analysis has been developed within the Design Studios of the Department of Architecture at the University of Strathclyde as a tool for urban analysis, primarily in Year 3 of the BSc(Hons) Architectural Studies course, but also as a standalone workshop as part of various events delivered by the Department.

For clarity, it is worth noting that in the current structure of the Department of Architecture at the University of Strathclyde, Year 3 is a non-graduating year which precedes the RIBA Part 1 Year out.

The author has identified the opportunity to use the Invisible Cities dialogues as the basis for a developing urban analysis tools to expand student thinking in relation to site analysis and project context. The tool was first introduced in 2010 as the method of site analysis for the Merchant City area of Glasgow – the location for the Year 3 Urban Housing project.

The Year 3 studio unit was subdivided into five MicroUnits, each containing five students. Each MicroUnit was allocated a city theme through which they were tasked to explore record and analyse the city. These themes were presented through the following provocations:

• Glasgow as a HOSTcity –instances and locations where our city plays host across a variety of scales;
• Glasgow as a LOSTcity – stories, routes, fabric;
• Glasgow as a SINcity – the idea of a multi-layered society, operating in different spaces at different times;
• Glasgow as a GARDENcity – instances of production, consumption, leisure and social space;
• Glasgow as aTRADEcity – historical trade, current trade and the potential for future trade.

MicroUnits were asked to explore the Merchant City to record, document and map instances of, or opportunities for their given theme. These instances could and should be

Figure 9: Exploring the city through five themes (Ross Campbell Photography)

physical, social, cultural, incidental, planned and unplanned. Recording processes included photography, drawing, written and spoken word, interviews and live mapping as the students began to gather a better understanding of the built fabric of the area of study as well as the over layering social, political and cultural significance of the city.

Just as Marco Polo had brought back objects as souvenirs, so too did each MicroUnits and these ranged from propaganda leaflets, urban debris, found objects and, importantly, recorded stories from citizens, tourists and workers from within the area. These interviews bore similarities to those conducted in San Jose and lead to some of the most compelling reactive design narratives.

As an output, each MicroUnit presented back to the studio unit their layered analysis of the Merchant City. This allowed the studio unit to develop a holistic body of research of the 'invisible' city of Glasgow. This research then served as a live design database as the individual proposals for urban housing schemes of mixed use and density began to develop – first as shared masterplans before progressing to individual, detailed design solutions.

Two schemes which were interesting and provocative were a housing block subdivided into varying modules where area and volume increased based on 'time spent' by their occupants (an hour / a week / a season / a generation…) and a rooftop city-farm with connecting bridges and walkways. Both schemes presented a contextual analysis of the city district that was rich in social, political and cultural analysis as well as offering their own provocations with regards to future scenarios for urban housing. Included within their design proposals were a summation of the results of the Five Cities themes which had been used to form and guide initial, and continuing design proposals.

To further test the analysis tool, the author used the five cities contextual analysis task on two further occasions with two different sets of students. In both instances, the students involved were asked to undertake the analysis of the city without then developing design responses.

The first of these included students who had successfully received a place to study in Year 1 of the BSc Architectural Studies course and the analysis task was delivered as part of an introductory workshop. An additional element to the task was a short, intensive discussion session prior to the analysis task to allow the students a better understanding of the nature of contextual analysis and to allow opinions to be expressed about the city based on preconceived ideas or knowledge of the area.

Also added to the process were printed maps of the Merchant City and a series of stickers, colour coded across the various city themes. This method of recording had not been prescribed to the Year 3 students during the studio project but the author was of the opinion that this method would facilitate a more tangible set of results for the student group involved.

The eight students that took part had a varying familiarity of the city area to be analysed. The author guided the group to several spaces and

Figure 10: Studio discussions with incoming Year 1 students (Ross Campbell Photography)

Figure 11: Mapping the five cities themes (Ross Campbell Photography)

presented examples of city themes. Thereafter, the group were encouraged to explore the city using the map provided.

The initial results were very sporadic and only the most obvious and superficial aspects of the city themes had been recorded. These included a scattering of pubs under sin city; any green space or planting under garden city and large, performance buildings under host city. The author used the recordings to challenge the group to explore the city in more detail and to be more precise with the recording of instances across the city themes. After a further period of exploration the group returned more detailed, considered results.

The session ended with a final discussion within the Department studios and participants noted that the activity had encouraged them to view the city differently and to be far more explorative in analysing the built fabric.

The next group to use the five cities analysing task were final year students from the College of Architecture within the Inner Mongolian University of Technology in Hohhot, China who were attending the Strathclyde Architecture International School. The group included 20 students and 4 staff and, to manage the group size, the author divided the group into four smaller pods each tasked with recording instances from all five city themes. City maps were once more provided to the group given their unfamiliarity with the city but this time the students were asked to propose the most appropriate method of recording and presenting their findings. Prior to commencing with the task, the author led the group on a walking tour of Glasgow city centre to assist with orientation and the identification of physical landmarks. During this tour, the group were informed of several important social and historical contexts.

Several of the groups borrowed heavily from internet searches and stock images rather than 'live' analysis of the area explored with almost identical research returned by the individual pods in terms of contextual analysis. In most instances, the information provided to the group during the walking tour was merely represented back to the author. However the author was aware of a significant cultural difference between the visiting group and the various student cohorts within the Department of Architecture.

Figure 12: Mapping routes and key landmarks through city themes. (Author)

Interestingly, the groups did return a very varied set of outputs when presenting their reaction to the Merchant City context they had been analysing. One group discussed their findings through a design response for a series of new courtyards within the city having been surprised at the perceived lack of public space within Glasgow. A second group mapped the routes taken during their analysis, recording distance and time between each important node and, from this, proposed a series of small interventions to act as social interaction stations. Both outputs were quite different from the responses from either the Year 1 or Year 3 groups. This may have been as a result of the structure of the task presented to participants which differed from group to group. The Year 1 students were asked to analyse only; the Year 3 students were asked to analyse and respond with design solutions for urban housing. In contrast, the students attending the International School were given the opportunity to respond dynamically through a designed response of their choosing.

Through this continued testing of the analysis tool developed, the author has been able to reflect on the similarities and contrasts in the manner with which each group has reacted and responded. The author will have further

opportunities to deliver this task, and observe reactions, throughout 2016 when the five cities workshop forms part of two more International Schools in May and July 2016. The author is also due to visit Sint-Lucas School of Architecture in Ghent, Belgium and will engage with Masters Students on an altered version of the workshop which will represent the first instance when the workshop has not been located in Glasgow.

At this point, the author has identified that the student analysis which involves interaction with citizens of the area through live interview techniques presents the most interesting base results from which to explore design lead solutions. While simple audio recordings allow the student analyst to access the information gathered, the author used the structure of the Department's Masters Programme to explore an alternative method of information gathering.

The Street Corner

The StoryMaker: A Machine for Gathering and Encouraging Stories of the City

Where the previous projects described thus far were primarily concerned with the proactive analysis of space and place, the StoryMaker project was conceived as a reactionary device to serve as both a repository and launchpad for stories told. Given the live nature of the brief: a small timber pavilion to be designed, fabricated and curated by two Masters Students of the University of Strathclyde's Department of Architecture as part of the 2015 Merchant City Festival in Glasgow, this represented one of the most ambitious projects undertaken by the Department.

The opportunity to work within the context of the Merchant City Festival and with a live client in 'Glasgow Life', the event organisers, was established through 'Projects through Collaboration' (PRO+COLS). PRO+COLS is coordinated by the author as a Year 4 option class which facilitates an integrated working relationship between Department students and industry practices on otherwise under-resourced or stalled projects.

Again, for clarity, it is worth noting that in the current structure of the Department of Architecture at the University of Strathclyde, Year 4 is the graduating year which follows

Projects Through Collaboration

PRO+COL Schedule of Meetings

RESEARCH + INVESTIGATION PHASE
11.11.15 - Introductory Meeting
25.11.15 - Progress Meeting 1 (Initial Responses)
09.12.15 - Progress Meeting 2 (Terms of Reference Agreed)

DESIGN DELIVERY PHASE
27.01.16 - Progress Meeting 3
10.02.16 - Progress Meeting 4
09.03.16 - Progress Meeting 5

PRO+COL COMPLETION PHASE
23.03.16 - Final Meeting

PRO+COL SUBMISSION
04.05.16 - Case Study Submission (Class Assessment)

S_AISS
09.05.16 - Two week workshop
Pro+Col 02 in Week 1 / Pro+Col 01 in Week 2

PRO+COL COLLABORATORS

C01 - Fiona MacGregor / Derek Hill
C02 - Dress for the Weather / TAKTAL
C03 - Dermot Smyth / Loch Lomond and the Trossachs
C04 - Haus Collective
C05 - Austin-Smith:Lord
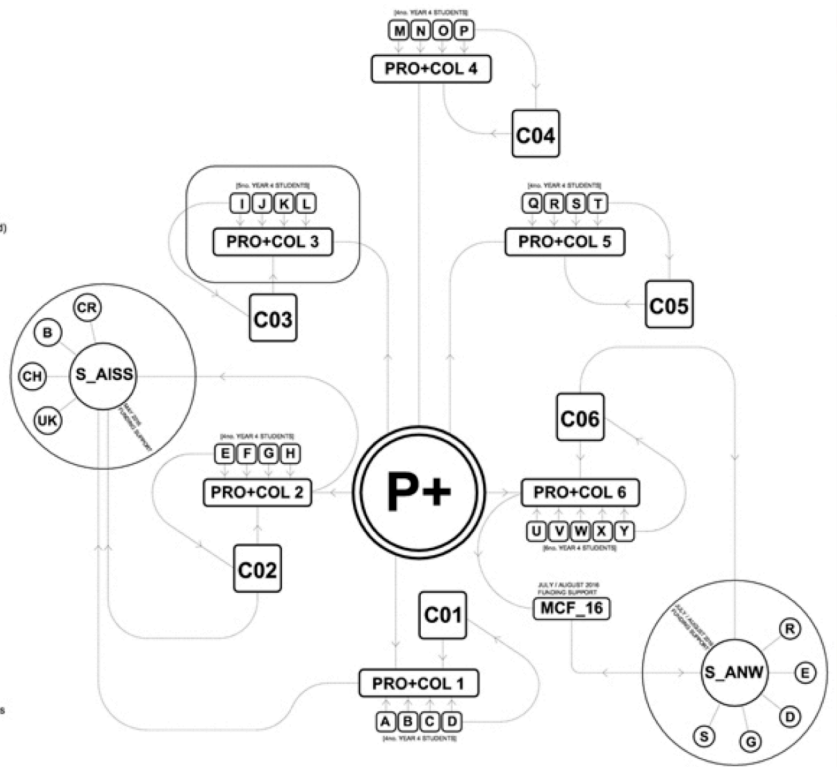C06 - Brian McGinlay / Mark Bell / Glasgow Life

Figure 13: Projects through Collaboration structure diagram. (Author)

the RIBA Part 1 year out. Students are awarded with an Honours degree in Architectural Studies.

While the opportunity for students of architecture to get their hands dirty through a construction process is, undoubtedly, a positive one, perhaps more important is the opportunity for students to understand the process and processes which take a drawing into reality.

The aim for PRO+COLS is therefore to provide exposure to the processes from concept to delivery, working with industry professionals on projects that require funding streams, must react to actual deadlines and which may or may not come to fruition. Participating students are presented with a range of real projects to work on for a period of time. These projects exist in one form or another within various Design Practices but require a degree of additional input or resourcing in order to be truly realised. Links between industry and academia have allowed symbiotic relationships to be forged: industry projects require resourcing, students of architecture are hungry for experience. The concept is simple: small groups of students (Design Team) unite with practicing architects and Department staff (Design Directors) to form 'Design Practices' enabling the resourcing and delivery of these projects. Each project works at a pace appropriate to its individual programme with student involvement encouraged – and supported – across academic recesses and out with timetabled hours.

What has been created through PRO+COLS is a delicate symbiosis between the industry and the student: the industry is requiring of an informal and temporary resource while the student is hungry for real project experience. The project would not develop without student input. The student would not gain experience without the project.

This method of academic recognition is established through a harmony between the Design Studio and PRO+COLS with the later picking up where the former leaves off. The seamless integration is reinforced further through the continued involvement of the Department's Design Studio Tutor team which is made up almost entirely by young, dynamic and creative practicing architects whose existing creative liaisons and collaborations have much to offer the Department.

Figure 14: ChalkTalk became an accessible platform for storytelling. (Ross Campbell Photography)

Figure 15: Detail of the external surface of ChalkTalk with chalk writing. (Ross Campbell Photography)

Figure 16: ChalkTalk as part of the 2015 Merchant City Festival. (Ross Campbell Photography)

The project allowed the author to further promote a model of collaborative resourcing between industry and academia and built on the PRO+COLS class but, importantly, the work previously undertaken through PRO+COLS served as a portfolio of experience which allowed the author to engage with Glasgow Life as client and provide comfort that a student project could deliver an

Figure 17: Stories were written on the external skin of ChalkTalk. (Ross Campbell Photography)

output appropriate to the pedigree of the Merchant City Festival which, in 2014, attracted more than 250,00 visitors to the city.

Through the PRO+COLS model, local practice Dress for the Weather together with Woolgar Hunter Engineers; Glasgow Institute of Architects; Glasgow Life and the Merchant City Festival collaborated with the Masters students from the Department on what became known as 'ChalkTalk'. The project was so called because the entire external skin of the pavilion was coated in blackboard paint, and chalk sticks were handed out to members of the public to encourage the most basic form of engagement and expression.

While the initial intention of ChalkTalk was to tour throughout the Merchant City for the ten days of the Festival, construction and Health and Safety implications saw the pavilion remain in one location for the entire duration of the Festival. On reflection, this anchoring undoubtedly added to the success of the project, giving a sense of permanence to the modest architectural object and allowing the ephemeral nature of its ever changing skin to become its endearing charm.

More significantly, this common location allowed stories to be made and broadcast in the most basic manner: through chalk. These stories became more about the immediate context (the corner of Bell Street and Candleriggs) and of the pavilion than the wider context of the Merchant City beyond

Unexpectedly, and despite daily prompts and suggested topics from the pavilion curators, stories and discussions were directly connected to the strange little black box with generic

peaked gables amidst the colour and energy of the Merchant City Festival. Festival participants, visitors to the city and locals alike took great delighted in scrawling and scribbling the most basic of chalk drawings onto the walls of ChalkTalk before stepping back to admire and photograph their creativity, often returning later in the day to share this with others.

A project which was conceived to serve as a platform from which to tell stories became on object to gather stories. It became a device which allowed visitors to react to their context and, with absolute immediacy, broadcast and present their reactions Even when ChalkTalk hosted a series of exhibitions and discussions from within her crisply detailed plywood interior, the external surfaces were the crowd pleaser and indeed, during the periods when the external sleeves closed in on each other to secure the internal volume, ChalkTalk saw public interaction increase even further. The city, its citizens and visitors saw this object as a reason to stop and wait a while.

The true success of this project can be measured through the interest generated at the close of the festival with several industry enquires about potential future use of the object as a community consultation device. As well as interest from Architecture and Design Scotland, the Lighthouse (Scotland's Centre for Design and Architecture) and Glasgow City Council, The Glasgow Institute of Architects have taken inspiration from 'ChalkTalk' when developing ideas for 'Eolas', their 2016 Festival of Architecture touring pavilion.

Additionally, immediately after the conclusion of the 2015 Merchant City Festival, representatives of Glasgow Life opened dialogue with the author through the PRO+COLS structure to ensure continued input from the Department of Architecture at the University of Strathclyde into the 2016 Merchant City Festival.

Conclusion

The design projects presented within this paper demonstrate the opportunity to use the architectural design studio as a laboratory for the development of various learning tools to facilitate a more critical mind-set among students of architecture. The projects focus on

the need to critically investigate and analyse 'context'; be that a physical, social or historical context. The author has gathered anecdotal evidence of the differing approaches across various student year groups and from various cultural backgrounds.

While Year 1 students require a greater degree of direction and input from the teaching staff, by Year 3, the student cohort display a more obvious investigative rigour and an ability to utilise the research gathered as important tools in deliver design projects.

Those projects which task the students with producing the analysis as the project output appear to generate the most imaginative responses with regard to presentation methods and vehicles. This perhaps suggests that analysis which underpins a design project is still regarded by the architectural student as a preliminary stage within the design process and should, therefore, be presented as such.

When developing future projects within the architectural studio, the author has, through this reflective process, achieved a better understanding of the learning outcomes evidenced and may therefore now have a greater ability to manipulate the tasks set to various groups throughout the student cohort.

REFERENCES

[1] Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (London: Vintage Classics, 1997).